GOD'S WILD GOOSE CHASE
Acts 2:1-4, 43-47
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I have always been very much taken with Francis Thompson's poem, "The Hound of Heaven."

"I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laugther
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed,
followed after.
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majesty instance..."

I have always been fascinated with that poem because of what it suggests about God and about ourselves. The poet's image of God is strong, God in pursuit, vigorous, unrelenting, a dramatic contrast to the passive God of the classroom about whom we speculate learnedly; or the domesticated God of popular religion, who, grandfatherly, benevolent, is safely irrelevant, or the God of culture who it is suggested, is a grand-scale reflection of national values, Uncle Sam in the clouds, as it were. God - as Hound of Heaven - in pursuit. Equally striking is the poet's portrayal of the human response to God. No open vessel here, no inquiring, investigating, striving seeker for God..rather

"I fled Him
I fled Him.
I fled Him.
I hid from Him."

That is the human experience of God, largely, I submit. The story of the Christian religion is punctuated by the experiences of those extraordinary people God has literally had to pursue, track, hunt down, corner: and their long effort to get away, avoid, hide from God. Among the more extraordinary Christians in the big story is Blaise Pascal: one of those once-in-a-generation geniuses, who in the 17th century distinguished himself as mathematician, physicist, philosopher, theologian, writer. Around the age of thirty he had a profound religious experience. He had always been a devout man, but on the 23rd of November, 1654, Pascal was captivated by the Holy. He wrote about the experience in a brief several paragraphs called The Memorial: which he sewed to the lining of his coat, where it was discovered by his servant after his death. Part of it reads:

"Fire...God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars."

And then near the end of the piece this remarkable confession.
"I have separated myself from Him: I have fled from Him,

denied Him, crucified Him...Let me never be separated from Him."
(Conversions, Kerr and Mulder, p. 36-39)

God the pursuer, man/woman, in flight: the divine/human encounter as chase.

So it was that a group of bewildered friends of Jesus, several weeks after the traumatic events of crucifixion and resurrection, were still in Jerusalem hiding, I have come to believe: not anxiously waiting for further instructions from God, but lying low from the authorities who would arrest them for their association with Jesus; and lying low from the Holy Spirit, scared that it all wasn't fantasy, that God had more in store for them. I have them hiding. And then on the Jewish feast day of Pentecost something happened they couldn't begin to explain. The description in the Acts of the Apostles is a pure and wonderful metaphor...the Spirit of God came to them - as in tongues of fire and a rushing wind - and they knew, as they had not known before, the reality of God's love in Jesus Christ, and they were able to and compelled to communicate that reality, as they had not been able to communicate it.

Pentecost - a day when God caught up with the friends of Jesus, cornered them, claimed them, reshaped them, recreated them, and gave them something to live and die for.

A day of awe!

It's a waste of time to keep focusing on the experience - whatever it was, and to superimpose a first century writer's description of the indescribable on the 20th century! What a shame to miss the remarkable and exciting suggestion here about the business God has to transact with us!

God, the Pentecost experience teaches, can be counted on to pursue, to press the case with us. The God of the Bible is not a passive object, a cosmic reality, like a black hole in space which will ultimately relinquish its essence to the investigating expertise of science. God is an energy, a power, a source of agitation, movement and change within the human story. God can be counted on to advocate his own program. Look for God, not only where peace and serenity and stability exist, but in the midst of ferment, agitation, and growth, personal and social change.

God as Energy

No wonder we flee him! Who needs that? Religion notoriously mirrors culture and more often than not is years behind the culture when it comes to significant change. The traditional description of the Church of England as the Conservative Party at prayer is not far off the mark. Religion is inclined to reflect, not shape culture. We are still the most segregated public institution in the land. And long after there is gender parity in medicine, law, physics, education, business, some of us in the church, it appears, will still be arguing that women shouldn't be clergy - just as some of us insisted the world was flat, and that the earth had to be in the center of the universe: long after the scholars knew better.

Christ is Post Res. servant

Pentecost is a warning to the timid. God will agitate for change. A church in which God's Spirit dwells will be a very lively place. And if the church is not alive and open to the Spirit of God: if, indeed, custom is more important than faithfulness; if our traditions so encumber us that we cannot respond to the lively, freeing wind of God's Spirit, that Spirit - in its relentless holiness, will blow somewhere else.

2nd millenium on Christ post resurrect

The personal word here is warning, but better yet, assurance. God has pursued us. God will continue to pursue us and does not let us go - ever. The God of personal faith is strong, assertive, vigorous. I have an aesthetic confession...I have never known what to make of the image of God's Spirit as a dove. It is one of the most beloved and enduring Christian symbols. It has never been a favorite of mine. Until I moved to Ohio I had never seen a dove. And since moving here the doves I know don't inspire me much. They are docile, slow, fat. And so, in addition to my penchant for the Hound of Heaven I was delighted to discover that I was not alone either. Celts didn't like doves either. The early Celtic Church - always iconoclastic, always uncooperative with Rome - adopted as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, the wild goose, undomesticated, wild, unpredictable, vigorous, strong, soaring.

That image, I would propose, is consistent with the Bible - history - and human experience. There are moments of quiet serenity when God's Holy Spirit comes as comfort, assurance, peace. But more often it is as pursuer, surprising in its strength, tenacity, vigor. God's Spirit, I submit, shows up - not solely as heavenly dove, but wild goose, Hound of Heaven, "Lone Wild Bird."

We come to table today - Pentecost - with the whole church of Christ. We come, many of us needing to be challenged, agitated, stirred for Christ's sake. We come, many of us, needing nothing so much as to be shaken by God's love for us - out of dry custom and lifeless routine. And I suspect we come, many of us, with our spiritual guard up, not sure we really want to be claimed by God, not certain we will be able to handle it. And I know we come, all of us, each of us, needing newness and refreshment and energizing.

So let us come, knowing that God our creator has invited us: that the one who loved us into life has been present down across the labyrinthine years; that the strong God of love, has pursued us through the corridors of time and will never give up the pursuit until we are found, claimed, loved, recreated.

To the God of all grace, who calls you to share God's eternal glory in union with Christ, be the power forever! Amen.